

Howard wants change

PRIME Minister John Howard has called for an overhaul of mining industry regulations to speed up approval of new projects.

Mr Howard said he had written to State and Territory leaders asking them to consider three "sensible" changes to Australia's mining and energy export industry.

His plan includes setting up a "one stop shop" for approvals, increasing the speed at which Aboriginal heritage issues are dealt with and spreading the liability for mine accidents.

Mr Howard said Australia's regulatory framework already worked well and compared favourably with the rest of the world, but could be improved.

"I can't see any reason why (the States) wouldn't (agree), because they're commonsense proposals to make a good system even better," he told the ABC.

In particular, Mr Howard wants the States to change occupational health and safety requirements so responsibility for mine accidents are not focused solely on mine managers, as is presently the case in some jurisdictions outside Western Australia.

He said it was difficult to find qualified mine managers because so much criminal responsibility was focused on them and not on others

who should share the blame for an accident.

"What we're trying to do is not make mines less safe, what we are trying to do is spread the responsibility to where it should be," Mr Howard told the ABC.

"It's a question of the fair sharing of burden."

Asked about the Burrup Peninsula site in north-western Australia, Mr Howard said it was an individual situation but there was a case for speeding up the processing of Aboriginal heritage issues.

"They should be dealt with fairly but they should be dealt with at a State level as speedily as possible," he said.

The Federal Government last week rejected an emergency heritage application that would have prevented a section of the Burrup Peninsula, which is said to contain about 165 ancient rock carvings, or petroglyphs, from being cleared.

It said only about 50 petroglyphs threatened by a new liquefied natural gas project would need to be moved to a site yet to be determined.

The National Trust of Australia says the Burrup site contains one of the world's largest and most important collections of petroglyphs, which date back to the last ice age.

Meanwhile, the union representing mining workers in the eastern States

says the Prime Minister will have "blood on his hands" if he succeeds in his attempts to modify mine safety laws.

Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union president Tony Maher said Mr Howard's claim that mine managers were solely responsible for accidents was false, and that any changes would lower safety standards.

"The legal liability does not solely rest on mine managers," Mr Maher said yesterday.

"The legal liability is placed on all employees and employers in the industry.

"That's proven by the fact that companies are prosecuted, managers are prosecuted, those lower in management ranks have been prosecuted, and ordinary rank and file mine workers have been prosecuted.

"It's all well and good to put your arms around the Beaconsfield survivors and shed crocodile tears about mine safety.

"But the laws that we have around the country have been built on the backs of the deaths of over 4000 Australians.

"There'll be lower standards if they are changed. Basically he'll have blood on his hands. More people will die. More people will be injured."